

Plowing Ahead

Hospital-led initiative is working to change the way one community in Connecticut thinks about food.

by Becky Schilling



Students in the New Milford Youth Agency learned about local products by scallop fishing with a local farmer last spring.

Contractor's Pledge, which states the company will actively pursue leads on locally sourced foods and educate consumers about these choices.

On July 9, Unidine took over and much has been done to revamp the menu. All food that previously had been frozen or canned is now fresh, according to Chris Chronis, vice president of marketing for Unidine. Chronis says he was excited about the opportunity to work with Plow to Plate because the hospital and Unidine's philosophies matched. "We are trying to source everything locally from the county," he says. "Plow to Plate is not only healthy food, but it's healthy for the community."

In addition to produce, Chronis says proteins and dairy items are also being sourced locally. "As we continue to add locally sourced products, the menu mix will change," he adds. DeBor and Unidine have also worked extensively with John Turenne, founder of Sustainable Food Systems, a consulting firm that helps operations become more sustainable. Turenne also is a former executive chef at Yale University who transformed the

university's dining program with the Yale Sustainable Food Project.

Farmers' market: "The reason I'm asked to speak a lot is because a lot of people don't get the community piece [in their local buying initiatives]," DeBor says. "They don't understand how this is the rising tide that lifts all boats." She says to imagine the Plow to Plate program working like a hub and spoke model, with the hospital as the hub and community groups as the spokes.

One of those spokes is a weekly farmers' market at a local park. The farmers' market features produce and other food items from local vendors. The farmers' market was not a new program in New Milford, but after the Plow to Plate pro-

gram partnered with the town and the farmer running the market in March, the number of vendors more than doubled. "We try to make it more than just a farmers' market, but a place to go for resources," DeBor says. "We want it to be a place where families can go on Saturday after-

noon between soccer games." Resource tables on site cover topics such as buying local and pesticide use. Activities for children are offered as well, including the Ask the Naturalist table, where a naturalist is on hand to field questions from curious attendees.

To help drive participation to the farmers' market and to get more community involvement, the Plow to Plate organization created Farm Bucks in June. Farm Bucks is specially created currency for the farmers' market; the market also accepts cash. A local writer who has a children's book series about farms designed the currency—a \$5 bill. The featured character in the series, Tractor Mac, makes an appearance on Farm Bucks. A \$5 Farm Bucks bill is distributed for free to patients af-

PHOTOS BY JENNIFER ALMOQUIST

New Milford Hospital's goal to buy local has transcended beyond the café and patient meals to include the community as a whole.

In October 2006, a small group of doctors, local chefs and hospital employees formed Plow to Plate, a community initiative supporting local farms, food and health in New Milford. Leading the or-

ganization and its message of bettering health through food and lifestyle choices is Marydale DeBor, vice president for external affairs at the hospital.

"We spearheaded this movement because a huge part of our mission as a community hospital is disease prevention," DeBor says. "We believe that changing the way people eat and the food system they depend on is fundamental to the whole problem we have with obesity and diabetes."

Foodservice: If New Milford Hospital was to be the guiding force and example, the foodservice at the hospital needed to make some changes first. DeBor and the hospital's management spent 18 months drafting a contract that would meet the guidelines developed to accomplish Plow to Plate's goals, which included buying hormone-free milk and making sustainability a top priority. "We got bids from six different companies, including one from the previous contractor," DeBor says. In the end, Unidine was selected because, DeBor says, the company recognized the opportunity as a way to push sustainability to the forefront of operations. In May, Unidine became the first foodservice contractor specializing in healthcare to sign Health Care Without Harm's Food Service

at a glance

New Milford Hospital Plow to Plate Snapshot

- 85-bed facility in New Milford, Conn.
- Plow to Plate is a local buying initiative that connects the hospital, Unidine, local doctors and farmers.
- Farm Bucks is specially created currency designed to boost participation at the weekly farmers' market.
- The New Milford Youth Agency partnered with Plow to Plate to create a culinary program for students.





Plow to Plate administrators work on plans for upcoming events (above). DeBor with a youth agency student (bottom right).

ter they visit local doctors' offices. "We're getting local buying and nutrition into the clinical exchange and getting the doctors involved," DeBor says. "The clinicians love it because they say, 'I never have time to talk to my patients about food.'" Serial numbers are on the back of the Farm Bucks so they can be tracked to find out how many come from each doctor's office. "The Farm Bucks change the conversation with people," DeBor adds. "When you put a value on buying local, that's when people start thinking that food really matters."

Youth agency: Another community outreach aspect of the Plow to Plate program is a partnership with the New Milford Youth Agency. In the partnership, 10 middle school students and 10 high school students participate in a 10-month program that creates "a little army of kids that really understand how food is grown, harvested, prepared and served," DeBor says. The students first go through a culinary training ori-

entation where basic skills are taught. Then, depending on the season, they visit local farms and harvest fresh products, which are then used to create a menu, which is served to the participants' families. For example, last spring the students went scallop fishing with a local fisherman. The students also get to see the career side of cooking by spending time in the kitchens of the hospital and area restaurants. "The students prepare a little public demonstration and part of the requirement is to go out to either their own school or the senior center and do a demonstration about local food so they have a touch of advocacy," DeBor adds.

DeBor's next project is a mentoring kit that includes all the information needed to start a program similar to Plow to Plate at other hospitals, which will be available this fall. "I can give this to people as a turnkey so people won't have to make this all up," she says. "If we make it easier for people, it will be easier to adopt."

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